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### The Art of Bleeding

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# The art of bleeding: memory, martyrdom, and portraits in blood

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This essay investigates the genre of the Indian blood painting, in which human blood is utilized as a medium of representation. It focuses, in particular, on the political and memorial functions of this kind of painting. Such paintings, often using the artist's own blood, frequently depict 'freedom fighters' (or *shaheed*) who perished in the Indian struggle for Independence, and are intended to reawaken memories among the public of forgotten martyrs. In so doing they form a moral commentary on a nation which, in its millennial rush to embrace the future, all too easily forgets the sacrifices that brought it into being. The political and memorial functions of this form of portraiture are contextualized within the country's wider sanguinary politics, which demonstrates the extent to which blood is both subject to and a means of contestation.

'Tum mujhe khun do, main tumhen aazadi doonga' – 'Give me your blood, and I will give you freedom.' These words, spoken by Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945; popularly known as Netaji) at a political rally in Burma in 1944, are some of the most quoted in India's modern history.<sup>1</sup> Their immediate purpose was to stimulate a willingness on the part of 'the Indian masses', contra Mahatma Gandhi's message of non-violence, to engage in armed struggle in order to bring to an end long-standing British colonial rule. To assert that it is an iconic phrase hardly does it justice. Its applicability – the different sorts of occasion on which it is uttered – appears to know no bounds. My interest here is in the sanguinary extractions it appears to precipitate in contexts of political practice. A quotation, states Barber, 'is only a quotation when it is inserted into a new context'; it involves both detachment and recontextualization (2005: 274). Inserted into present-day political contexts, Bose's words 'precipitate' (or constitute the rhetorical occasion for) various sorts of 'shedding'. Petitions formed of the blood of political campaigners, medical blood donation on Bose's birth and death anniversaries, portraits in blood of various political figures – all fairly common occurrences within a variety of mass political Indian milieus – are frequently framed as responses to Bose's exhortation, which, re-embedded into a multitude of new contexts, continues to draw its power from an acute recognition of its pre-existence as a call to shed blood in order to be rid of a foreign colonial power. The (sanguinary) nationalist exchange relation invoked by Bose has indeed enjoyed a rich and diverse career.

My particular interest here is in a recontextualization of Bose's iconic refrain that sees it deployed as inspiration for the use of human blood for painting purposes. Whilst seeking to explore in quite general terms the propensity in Indian political culture towards sanguinary forms of communication and expression, my principal ethnographic examples here concern the blood portrait as a kind of sub-style or technique within the larger milieu of sanguinary political expressionism in the country. I focus on an example of blood portraiture that was directly inspired by Bose's utterance – an exhibition of blood portraits that I visited on numerous occasions in Delhi in 2009. The subjects of the portraits, including Bose among them, were 'freedom fighter' martyrs – sacrificial heroes of the Independence struggle. The following details concerning the exhibition and the processes involved in commissioning and maintaining the paintings derive from my visits to the exhibition, where I spoke at length with its organizer and visitors, but also from newspaper accounts and the visitors' book, with its thousands of entries, to which I was kindly given access.

Given that South Asia is a region justly famed for restrictions placed on flows of substance (especially those substances considered most defiling, such as blood), the use of human blood for purposes of 'art', and mass political communication more generally, may evoke some surprise.<sup>2</sup> This essay will suggest that it is in part *because* of such restrictions that the genre possesses a marked expressive force. Fears concerning blood loss and anxieties about the mixing of substances can cause instances of precisely those things to form powerful statements – about a differentially composed but none the less singular nation, for example (Copeman 2009a: chap. 7). Artworks have long formed an integral feature of nationalist narratives. Idols and images from India's ancient past 'continue their lives resituated as art objects in Indian museums', playing a key part in 'the colonial and postcolonial project of constructing an Indian national identity' (Davis 1993: 45). There is also a well-established tradition of explicitly patriotic art, insightfully documented by Pinney (2004) and Ramaswamy (2008). Such art often depicts nationalist heroes having spilled, or in the act of spilling, their blood. The patriotic art that I explore here likewise depicts martyrs revered for having shed their blood, but differs in also being composed of human blood; moreover, these portraits speak to a very contemporary set of concerns to do with memory and forgetting. I examine the role of these paintings as defences of a particular (nationalist) 'body of [treasured] remembrances' (Halbwachs 1950: 22), which is experienced by their creators as under threat.

If these literally bloody patriotic works differ from mainstream Indian patriotic art, they also differ from the use of blood in Western art.<sup>3</sup> Discussions of the use of body substances (particularly blood) in Western art typically argue that it marks a return to primitive ritual (e.g. Siebers 2003), and/or that it results 'naturally' from the trauma consequent on the cataclysmically bloody events of the twentieth century. The flow of the blood of performance artists such as Marina Abramović is often analysed according to its 'shock value' (Weiermair 2001), while, more recently, 'bioart' – a 'field which is now emerging at the intersection of the creative arts and the bio-medical sciences' (Palladino 2010: 96, see also Anker & Franklin 2011), and which frequently employs as media human (and animal) substances, sometimes in bio-molecular or diseased form – has been considered to offer the potential to reconfigure, even to subvert, the constraints of 'bio-political governmentality' (Palladino 2010: 106). There are no doubt points of connection between these genres and Indian blood portraiture – all of them, for instance, raise questions concerning distinctions between presence and representation, while questions of loss, ritual, and 'shock value' are certainly raised in the Indian

case. This essay will suggest, however, that unlike the forms of body art described above, the Indian case presents us with a direct political intervention (if bioart *does* provide radical political commentary, it does so only obliquely). The Indian case also speaks to a very specific political history and present-day situation and possesses its own unique set of representational and mnemonic complexities – complexities that this essay seeks to unpack.

### Inside the Red Fort

The sign outside the tin-roofed exhibition hall, situated within Delhi's Red Fort (Lal Quila) complex and framed by an elongated Indian tricolour, stated in Hindi and in English: 'Exhibition of Blood Paintings of Young Martyrs' (Fig. 1). The exhibition ran from October 2009 until spring of the following year, and the number of visitors it received was in the hundreds of thousands (3-4,000 per day, according to official figures). Few of these visitors, however, entered the complex with the express intention of visiting the exhibition or in the knowledge that it even existed. The primary purpose of nearly all the visitors was to inspect the richly symbolic historical buildings of the Red Fort. Past the fort's famous Lahore Gate and a row of stalls selling tourist memorabilia, however, just prior to the main set of buildings, lies the exhibition hall, conveniently enough located for a large proportion of tourists to make the impromptu decision to pay it a visit (there was no additional cost). Most visitors were Indian; a good proportion of them had arrived on coach trips from the provinces, visiting the Red Fort as part of a nationalist itinerary that included other notable sights in the capital such as Mahatma Gandhi's memorial and former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's house. I estimate that between 5 and 10 per cent of visitors were foreign tourists. Despite the location of the exhibition at an international tourist site, however, the primary intended audience was an Indian one, as we shall see.



Figure 1. Outside the exhibition. (All photos by the author.)

A great Mughal structure, the fort possesses dense nationalist associations: for instance, the Prime Minister addresses the nation and raises the Indian flag at the Red Fort each year on Indian Independence Day, and it houses a chair said to have been used by Subhas Chandra Bose during his days in Burma at the helm of his self-styled Provisional Government of Independent India (Azad Hind). And it is Bose's famous utterance, 'Give me your blood, and I will give you freedom', from which the organizer of the exhibition, Ravi Chander Gupta, took his original inspiration (*prerna*). Indeed, the very first portrait he gave his blood for – painted by his friend and colleague the artist Gurdarshan Singh Binkal – was of and for Bose, painted as it was in 1997, Bose's centenary year (Fig. 2). Significantly, the painting was made in front of Delhi school-children. For Gupta, a retired schoolteacher, the children's dispiriting ignorance of former patriotic sacrifices was one of the motivating factors behind the portraits: 'The biographies of martyrs should be included in course curriculum. Paintings, posters and calendars of freedom fighters should be promoted so that more and more people know them and read about them'. As one news report puts it: 'Gupta feels that very few people are aware about our freedom fighters and especially the youth'.<sup>4</sup> Another reports that Gupta's organization hopes to 'take the 150-portrait "Shaheed" exhibition across the country "since it is the only way of creating awareness about the sacrifice of the martyrs. Those born in the post-Independence era cannot feel the struggle of freedom fighters," Ravi Chander Gupta ... said'.<sup>5</sup> A selection of the eighteen books Gupta has written on



**Figure 2.** Subhas Chandra Bose (Gupta's first painting).



the martyrs, several of which were published by the Indian government, were on display at the entrance to the exhibition alongside the visitors' book (Fig. 3). Gupta has been particularly concerned to highlight the role played by child martyrs in the Independence struggle, most of whom barely register in official accounts. He lives alone; as he put it to me: 'the martyrs are my family'.

At the entrance to the hall was positioned the very first blood portrait made: that depicting Bose in his classic military pose. Beside the portrait of Bose, the exhibition's rubric was displayed:

Why use blood as ink? (*Rakt ki syahi se hi kyun?*). Those martyrs could have supported their old parents. They could have led a life of luxury with their families, could have become high-level writers, industrialists, businessmen, or leaders and earned money and fame. But they chose something else ... the path of sacrifice. They loved their country more than their families. They wanted to see the future generations as citizens of a free and prosperous nation. We heard that the history of the sacrifice made by the martyrs would be written in gold letters.<sup>6</sup> But where has it been written? I thought, if not in gold letters, it can be written in blood letters ... and the process started. This exhibition is a humble tribute to the martyrs.

The lament 'But where has it been written?' takes us to the heart of Gupta's project – his fear that knowledge of the noble sacrifices of the many citizens who died fighting for freedom is fading away:

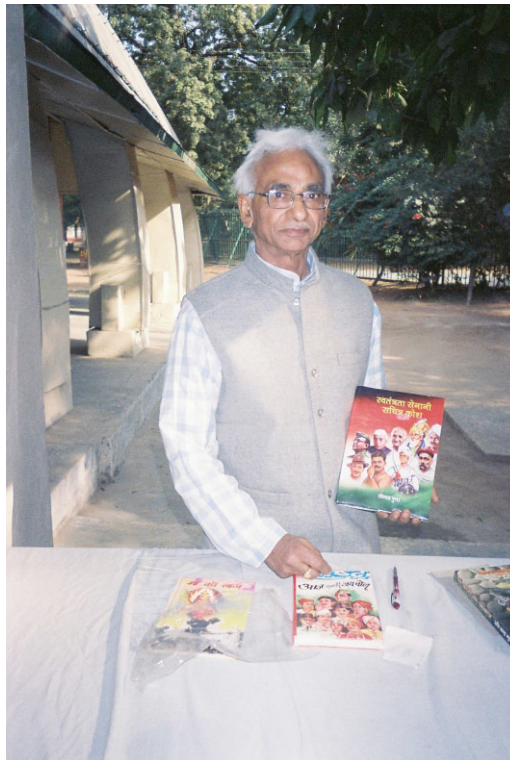


Figure 3. Ravi Chander Gupta with books he has written on the martyrs.

I am spreading awareness through this exhibition. This is to remind the people who are forgetting. The [sacrifices of the] *shaheed* (martyrs) are not taught on the curriculum. It is the need of the time to bring these stories onto [school] courses so that children may gain inspiration from them. The government is sleeping on this.

Another of Gupta's concerns is the impression he has of youthful martyrs as having been scripted out of the nationalist narrative, so he undertook twelve years of research on their histories, documenting more than 500 children and young adults (from the ages of 6 to 20 years) who died in the freedom struggle. Many, though not all, of the portraits in the exhibition depict these hitherto neglected child martyrs.

Speaking of the very first portrait for which he provided blood, that of Subhas Chandra Bose, Gupta told me: 'I wanted to use my dearest thing (*sab se priya vastu*) – to offer it to Neta Ji. The dearest particle of my life – this is blood only. I can do this for him'. As an offering to Bose, it seems almost like a last-ditch attempt on the part of Gupta to respond to Bose's exhortation that he be given the blood of the citizenry. Too young at the time, decades later Gupta is perhaps finally able to participate in a glorious cause. This is, then, a sacrificial portraiture: for the martyrs and for the nation. But the use of blood is also understood to be efficacious in respect of Gupta's larger concern to remember the martyrs:

The public is attracted to portraits of blood. I started this to attract the public and get their attention. People are more interested if the portraits are in blood; they are more motivated, more curious if blood is used rather than paint. Blood creates sentiments; sentiment (*bhavna*) is attached to blood. It acquires social value and importance if done in blood.

Of further note are the patriotic songs, mainly from Hindi films of the 1950s, which played continuously in the hall and that added to the multisensory nature of the exhibition. I asked Gupta about his choice of music: 'I am playing these songs to inculcate love for the country, to create an atmosphere. When you enter a *mandir* (temple) you light incense and transform the atmosphere. Like that, these songs create an atmosphere of patriotism'. A song I heard numerous times during my visits is the classic 'Ai mere watan ke logo' ('O! People of my country!'), sung by Lata Mangeshkar, which commemorates Indian soldiers who died during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and which was famously performed before India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on the country's 1963 Republic Day. Its themes correspond closely to those emphasized by Gupta, centring as they do on blood and memory:

O! People of my country! Keep on chanting the slogans [the slogans praising India]. This is an auspicious day for all of us. Unfurl our beloved tricolour, but don't forget that at the borders brave people have lost their lives. Remember those who never returned home ... When the Himalayas were wounded [by Chinese forces], when our freedom was in peril, as long as they had any breath left in them, they fought ... When it was [the festival] of Holi they played [it] with their blood. When we were sitting in our homes they were being pierced by bullets ... Some were Sikh, some were Jat [a cultivating caste] and some Maratha [hailing from Maharashtra], some were Gurkha and some from Madras. Whosoever died at the border, every such warrior was an Indian. The blood that fell on the hills of the Himalayas – that blood was Indian ... Lest you forget them this story has been recounted ... Victory to India, Victory to the Indian Armed Forces ...

Holi is a spring festival celebrated in honour of the god Krishna in which playful reversals of gender, generation, class, and caste are enacted in a variety of ways (Cohen

1995: 401). It usually involves the throwing of various brightly coloured substances – vividly re-imagined in ‘Ai mere watan ke logo’ as bright red blood. Usually considered particularly pleasurable, or *masti*, the festival is here melded with the high seriousness of national sacrifice. Of further note is the song’s integrative aesthetic, with its references to different religious, caste and regional ‘types’ of fallen hero – Sikh, Jat, and so on. The song thus introduces and enfolds themes of memory and integrated difference (by way of an idiom of blood) that are critical to the analysis below. In referring explicitly to the Sino-Indian War of 1962 it also underlines the important point that, though Gupta is principally concerned to remember those who fought and died in the fight against colonial rule, in addition his portraits memorialize Indians who have died in subsequent conflicts – the most recent of his portraits depict martyrs of the 1999 Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan.

### Martyrs and memory

Mazzarella has recently referred to the way in which the achievement of Indian Independence in 1947 was not only a moment of victory but also ‘in a very important sense a moment of loss’ – a ‘loss of the loss’, as he puts it (2010: 1–2). This is useful in helping us to understand the predicament of Gupta and other members of the organization he has formed to produce and look after the paintings. Scholars have been active in emphasizing various sorts of alienation and loss consequent upon colonial rule (e.g. Nandy 1983); at the same time, however, it can be argued that ‘colonization enabled a fullness of nationalist subjectivity ... In this paradoxical sense, British colonial rule was for India the loss that made possible the affective plenitude of mass nationalism’ (Mazzarella 2010: 2). Gupta and his colleagues seek to revivify this affective plenitude in a kind of delayed challenge to, and contemporary variant of, the ‘loss of the loss’. Of particular concern is the popular and bureaucratic failure to remember past sacrifices considered to be the occluded condition of the present relentlessly future-orientated national situation. To paraphrase Engelke (2007), Gupta’s blood portraits speak to a problem of nationalist presence.

Recall now the lines from Gupta’s exhibition rubric: ‘We heard that the history of the sacrifice made by the martyrs would be written in gold letters. But where has it been written? I thought, if not in gold letters, it can be written in blood letters’. The portraits are thus objects in the service of memorialization – a subject that a number of sophisticated anthropological studies have tackled in recent years (e.g. Carsten 2007; Kuchler & Melion 1991; Miller & Parrott 2009). The memorializing thrust of the portraits is necessary because existing memorialization processes are experienced as inadequate or tokenistic.<sup>7</sup> Their purpose is to invoke a memory that is not passive but active, as the stimulus of a revived sacrificial spirit. This is memorialization as a call to action.

Gupta recalled to me his days as a schoolteacher in a government school in east Delhi: ‘I felt the children knew nothing. They thought we achieved freedom without lifting a finger. They sang popular songs about Gandhi and *ahimsa* (non-violence). They thought we got freedom without picking up a weapon! And so I said, well, I need to tell the children it’s not true’. This is, then, an explicitly anti-Gandhian project of re-education. Nationalist historiography – at least in terms of its manifestation in school curricula – thus hinges on what Gupta sees as a Gandhian perversion; a perversion to be corrected, in part, by the exhibitions he stages.

I mentioned earlier the ‘relentless’ future orientation of a present moment that seems to form, for Gupta and his organization, yet another ‘loss of the loss’ insofar as it further eviscerates the affective plenitude of mass nationalism and its manifold



sacrifices. The problem is that the new neoliberal consumerist order, inaugurated in the early 1990s, seems to possess a finite and shallow national memory akin, so to speak, to 'a glass, which when it becomes full, begins to shed its old content as the new is poured in' (Macfarlane 1997: 23). It is no accident, I suggest, that Gupta's painting project was begun at this time of expedited social and economic transformation.

Connerton discusses the intimate linkages between the valorization of memory and processes of cultural forgetting. Memorials exemplify this inverse relation, 'for the desire to memorialize is precipitated by a fear, a threat, of cultural amnesia' (Connerton 2009: 27). He offers the example of museums: 'It was when the age of mechanical reproduction caused objects to become obsolete at an ever accumulating speed that many Europeans devoted their energy to a cult of monuments without earlier parallel and founded public museums on an unprecedented scale' (2009: 27). Particularly pertinent for the present discussion is Connerton's claim that 'when a nation feels itself to be no longer a place where history on a grand, a truly memorable, scale is being made, it turns inward to cultivate its memorials' (2009: 28).

The Indian case both reflects and inverts this scenario. The post-1990s dismantlement of the Nehruvian planned economy – the withdrawal of the state from its role as principal overseer of production – has led to the increasing integration of India into the world economy and the consequent dramatic emergence of a middle-class consumerist ideology. Now an assertively modern aspiring global power, Indian metropolitan newsstands and bookshops are full of '2020 Vision Documents' (manifestos spelling out just how – and certainly not *if* – India will shake off the embarrassing impertinence of its 'developing country' status by that magic date). Truly, in Connerton's terms – and so far as its metropolitan elite is concerned – this is a country in the business of making history, and of gaining its rightful inheritance, and as such it is precisely *not* turning inward to cultivate its memorials. The energies of its political and media class all seem directed towards a glorious future. An urgent need to remember is thus precipitated by the insistent future-orientated impulse of the present moment.

It is not only Gupta and his organization who are alarmed by this future-fixated impulse. In 2009 a blood donation camp was staged in a spatio-temporal conjunction saturated with nationalist significance: the place was Jalianwala Bagh in Punjab, scene of one of the colonial government's most notorious atrocities when in 1919 General Dyer ordered his soldiers to fire indiscriminately upon the peaceful protesters in the park; the time was Mahatma's Gandhi's birthday (Gandhi Jayanti). The camp's organizers stated that its aim was 'to awake the government from deep slumber to grant the status of freedom fighter to the martyrs killed during the massacre of 13 April 1919'. Perhaps, then, this event, as well as Gupta's own efforts, is indicative of the intimate link 'between memorialization and the moment of felt transience' (Connerton 2009: 28). The association surfaces with particular acuity, says Connerton, at times when soon there will no longer be left any first-hand witnesses of the remembered events – as with the current urge to build memorials to the Holocaust. The observation perhaps holds for the case of the Indian nationalist movement, too. Maybe this, as much as the present future orientation of metropolitan India, explains the current acute presence of a counter-tendency – an urgent will to remember.

It is a sociological truism that 'people constantly transform the recollections that they produce' (Zelizer 1995: 216). For Gupta's organization, such transformation is precisely the problem – it aims to intervene in the negotiation process of collective memory in order to revivify and stabilize a particular body of remembrances. But the

project is not only one of restoration. Gupta counters transformation with transformation, for in foregrounding those who died fighting colonial rule – that is, by highlighting the active role of *violent revolutionaries* in overthrowing the imperial yoke – the very narrative that India achieved Independence non-violently is called into question. In this sense Gupta's project is anything but conservative.

### Coming together to bleed

By the mid-2000s more than a hundred portraits had been completed, with Gupta busying himself exhibiting them in schools and elsewhere. By this time he had also formed an organization, the Shaheed Smriti Chetna Samiti (Society to Awaken Remembrance of the Martyrs; henceforth 'the *samiti*'), in order that the paintings would be cared for after his passing. Tellingly, the Sanskrit word *smriti* is literally 'that which is remembered'. Until 2004, all the paintings were formed of Gupta's blood. However, after two bypass surgeries (Gupta is now 73), doctors forbade him to provide any more of his own blood, so the artist Binkal now uses his own blood to paint the martyrs. But there arose a problem – the paintings were fading, and the artist could hardly be expected to provide *all* the necessary blood for their re-touching.

So there is a telling irony here: blood is the ink with which to redeem the promise of gold letters for the immortalization of the freedom fighters, but blood as artistic material is inconstant and ephemeral, partaking of the flux that is the hallmark of materials (Ingold 2007). Analogous with the faded memories the paintings are supposed to enliven, blood, too, fades. Ssorin-Chaikov has explored the material and temporal fragility of timelessness in respect of an exhibition of gifts given to Stalin on his birthday in 1949. Presented to an 'immortal' leader in the context of a 'timeless' socialist present, many of the gifts were broken in the rush of constructing the exhibition, and the exhibition itself, created 'for good', existed only until Stalin's death a few years later (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006: 358). Such entropy at the heart of the timeless memorial was potentially dangerous: 'A special sub-committee was set up at the Communist Party Central Committee Administration to observe the decay of numerous food items and the condition of breakables such as china. It was to document that there was no *intention* involved in the decomposition of gifts to Stalin' (2006: 370, original emphasis). However, in the case of the *samiti*'s decaying portraits, the potential danger of simply *re-presenting* the fragility of memories of the martyrs' timeless sacrifices in material form was turned into an opportunity.

In 2008 in Ghaziabad, a district of Uttar Pradesh state adjacent to Delhi, a special 'blood camp' was staged in order to collect blood for use in re-touching the portraits. The blood of 125 people was collected. The portraits' decay was thus turned into an opportunity for co-re-creation: that is, for the artworks' re-creation according to a template of national participation. 'Difference' (e.g. of caste, religion, or geographic provenance) among blood contributors was actively encouraged, with the portraits – now composed of multiple mingled bloods – becoming sanguinary microcosms of the national *unitas multiplex*.

As Gupta noted to me:

There were a lot more people but we didn't need more. It was organized for making national sentiments. We used bottles – only 20 ml each. We put an anti-clotting chemical into it; there was just that, and the blood. We mixed the blood together and directly used it. First of all you sketch on the paper with a pencil and then you paint over it with [regular] paint so that there is only a very faint outline, and then you paint over the faint outline with the blood.

Depicted on the banners adorning the Ghaziabad event were the words: 'Shahido keliye rakt sangrah shivir' ('Blood collection for the martyrs'). 'People came running to contribute for the martyrs', says Gupta. Blood was donated, then, *for* the martyrs. Despite an effort to distinguish between blood collection and medically useful blood donation, this was indeed, in a sense, a blood *donation* camp, but with recipients who were dead rather than living. More specifically, the donation was to their memories – the call was for donations that would keep the dead (rather than the precariously living) alive (in people's memories). The element of exchange is fairly explicit: the martyrs gave their blood for the nation; contemporary Indians are exhorted to give them their blood to keep their memory alive.

I focus for a moment on the mixing mentioned by Gupta. Of course, in many situations in the subcontinent bodily mixing is anathema – strict corporeal separations are enforced in order to maintain caste purity; indeed, all sorts of restrictions adhere in the flow of substance (see, e.g., Lambert 2000). However, partly because of this very negative power attributed to the mixing of substances, there inheres within the 'politics of substance' a strong utopian potential (Alter 1992: 258). Mixing in the form of, say, an inter-caste marriage or a transfusion sourced from different religious 'types' (see Cohen 2001) can carry powerful messages about nationhood, reason, and civic-mindedness. The Nehruvian integrative nationalist or rationalist activist can gain great satisfaction from transgressing restrictions in flows of substance; but in 'constructively' inverting the typical pattern of restrictions, the pattern can, paradoxically, be reproduced – it is simply the valuation of the transgression that is altered. Perhaps, therefore, what Gupta sees when he looks at the (re-touched) paintings is an exemplary saturation, a concentration of the differential blood of the nation that speaks an answer to the heroes it depicts: a contemporary response to a bygone exhortation (to shed one's blood for the nation), a vital instantiation of the very sentiment (willingness to shed one's blood) that the portraits seek to inspire.

Also of interest was the use of 20 ml collection bottles – far smaller than the medical limit. As Gupta explained to me: 'We collected 20 ml only [from each person] so that many people could be involved. Only one syringe each'. Gupta is clear, then, that multiple sources of blood, though not strictly necessary, were nevertheless desired (and facilitated). He also explains that women, Muslims, and children all contributed. (The backgrounds of the contributors were *alag-alag*, 'different-different', as he put it.) This was thus an example of the spatial concentration of difference that is characteristic of the Indian nationalist ideology of national integration more generally (Copeman 2009a: chap. 7). As Hugh-Jones (2011) has observed, '[B]lood-brotherhood [may be] produced not only by mixing blood together but also by mixing together to give blood'. This was, then, an Arendtian coming together of diverse individuals for a shared purpose – the enactment of a belated response to Bose's exhortation in the form of extractive artistic participation (Arendt 1994). Present-day bleeding under the sign of Bose's refrain is a way of sustaining the vitality of this refrain, with all its connotations of affective nationalist plenitude.

Consider now the question of repeatability raised by Bynum in respect of Christ's 'once for all' blood sacrifice: '[I]f Christian sacrifice is once for all, how are the sanctifying effects maintained in a temporal world? If Christ is not sacrificed anew on the altar, how do Christians plug into, or keep afresh, a moment of erupting holiness that is anything but momentary?' (2007: 245). Gupta and his *samiti* are similarly concerned with keeping afresh and plugging into the 'original' nationalist sacrifices that took place

in the struggle for Independence. Rather like the blood donation events staged on Bose's birth and death anniversaries, the sanguinary nature of the portraiture they produce is a means of continually responding to, and keeping fresh, the nationalist exhortation to sacrifice (one's blood). As Bynum summarizes the problem of Christ's bleeding sacrifice: '[H]ow could it be momentary yet eternal?' (2007: 245). For the medieval German blood cults she analyses, the immediacy, but also the participatory nature, of 'blood miracles' alongside the Mass formed a kind of solution. With the crucifixion multiply re-enacted by way of miraculous bloodshed events, Christ was kept bleeding multi-locally and trans-historically. Taking blood from a national 'congregation' for mixing into the martyrs' portraits denotes a similarly participatory solution to the problem of maintaining nationalist plenitude as an ongoing 'eruption'. Re-touching will presumably be required again, along with a renewed call to a differentially imagined citizenry to give its blood for the martyrs. When the time comes, what will be demonstrated, once more, is how the generative flux of the world of materials (Ingold 2007: 12) may yield rich nationalist dividends.

### Traces

But what sort of representation is achieved through use of the blood medium? For Gupta, as was noted above, the use of blood is important for gaining people's interest – it is, in this sense, a tactical usage. But it is also significant because, in being formed through acts of bleeding, there is an important sense in which the portraits constitute themselves the emulation they call for – adding to their hoped-for precipitative force. There is a venerable tradition of patriotic Indian portraiture, a genre that gathered in intensity during the struggle for Independence, and which made similar demands on the contemporary viewer, who was encouraged to make sacrifices of a comparable nature to those depicted (particularly iconic are those depicting Bhagat Singh offering his own bloody head to Bharat Mata [India as mother goddess] [see Pinney 2004; Ramaswamy 2008]). While Gupta's paintings certainly connect to this lineage of didactic portraiture, they also obviously differ: first, in being of far more recent provenance, speaking to a present-day situation understood to be marked by accelerated forgetting; and, second, in being literally composed of the blood they seek to elicit from others. Moreover, these are metonymic extractions: a small part of one's blood is indicative of the larger deficits the giver is willing to offer in the future if necessary. This is a kind of memorialization that, as I have noted, is also a call to action. In terms of 'aesthetics', this emphasis on efficacy – the intention that the blood portraits should cause things to happen – appears congruent with Gell's (1998: 97) observation that representational art in India is a unity of form and function (see also Pinney 2004: 190).<sup>8</sup> Whether or not the portraits are in fact successful in this respect is a point I address below, though the following example provides part of the answer.

Leafing through the visitors' book with Gupta – a favourite occupation of his during the long days of the exhibition, at which he was always present – I asked him which, of the thousands of comments, he found most gratifying. He guided me unhesitatingly to the words of an 8-year-old schoolboy from Delhi: 'These paintings are from the heart. When the time comes to sacrifice my blood for the protection of my country I will sacrifice my whole life'. As Gupta put it to me: 'This exhibition is to inspire the people to make sacrifices. Sacrifices are not all over now. You can still do it; you *should* still do it. The sacrifices are not only in the past; even in the future there is a time for sacrifice for the country'. In other words, Gupta is calling for the re-temporalization of sacrifice.

The paintings are thus a form of enactive remembering – depictions of blood sacrifice that perform the bleeding they represent and seek to inspire. I have referred to the hoped-for precipitative force of the portraits, so it is important to consider where such a force might come from. As was noted above, the portraits are (amongst other things) a retort to ‘weak’ Gandhian nationalism. And the retort appears to ‘work’, in part, through their being imitative of the bleeding they seek to inspire (see Bynum [2007: 4] on imitations of Christ’s bleeding). This, then, is a kind of mimetic bleeding art – ‘mimetic’ insofar as ‘originary’ blood sacrificers are paid homage to by bleeding in turn, but mimetic also in terms of the willingness to sacrifice one’s blood that it is supposed to incite in the viewer. The paintings call for emulation as models of and models for sacrificial bleeding.

That this is imitative art, which in turn (it is hoped) will be imitated, is suggestive of a kind of sympathetic magic; for that which is desired (patriotic bleeding, or at least *willingness* to bleed) is imitated in order to make it happen in the future (‘[T]he magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it’ [Frazer quoted in Taussig 1993: 47]). Moreover, as the portraits perform the bleeding they both represent and seek to inspire, complexity is ‘added in’ to the idea that this is representational art at all: that is to say, the distinction between representation and presence is problematized, a blurring that is quite common in ‘body art’ (Jay 2002: 65). Certainly, blood is the medium through which the fallen freedom fighters are represented, but it is also a literal corporeal trace of the artist’s presence. This has interesting consequences, as we shall see.

Consider Gell’s famous delineation of the aniconic symbol, which he compares to the foreign diplomat: ‘The Chinese ambassador in London ... does not look like China, but in London, China looks like him’ (1998: 98). Similar to the ambassador, who is a ‘spatio-temporally detached fragment of his nation’ (1998: 98), aniconic works of art, such as religious idols, make gods present in visual form. One can ‘represent’ in the manner of a painting (iconically), but one can also ‘represent’ in the manner of an ambassador (aniconically). Blood portraits are both iconic *and* aniconic: iconic because they visually depict fallen martyrs; aniconic because the artist is *present* in the painting not only in terms of conceptualization and technique, but also, critically, as physical residue. That the corporeal self of the artist is mixed with the primary subject of the portrait, thereby ‘entering into’ the subject of representation, suggests that what results, paradoxically, may be considered a kind of self-portrait.

We can discern here a quite familiar South Asian template. Hindu rituals contain identification between worshipper and deity as a central theme and objective (in *puja*), with identification reinforced subsequently through the offering of substances such as food and flowers (*prasad*). *Puja* (worship) aims to ‘create a unity between deity and worshipper that dissolves the difference between them’ (Fuller 2004: 57). There is, I suggest, a *puja* element to the portraits, with the blood of which they are composed a kind of offering to the depictions it comprises. In this sense, the sign and the flesh are one; or one might say that the iconic and aniconic elements lose their separate identities in the space of the portrait-as-*puja*. Recall that the sense of an offering was explicit at the special re-touching event discussed above, with the public asked to give blood for the martyrs in return for the blood they sacrificed in the work of securing national Independence. That the wider Indian genre of patriotic art, of which Gupta’s works constitute a subspecies, incorporates nationalist heroes into the Hindu pantheon substantiates the argument that a *puja* element inheres within the portraits. Ramaswamy refers to a portrait in blood depicting Mahatma Gandhi exhibited in the National Gandhi Museum in New Delhi. The ‘literally bloody painting shows Gandhi with not

one but three heads (two of them painted in the colours of the national flag), signifying his apotheosis into the Hindu pantheon with its many multiheaded and multilimbed gods' (Ramaswamy 2008: 838). While it is rare for such patriotic portraiture to use blood as its representational medium, it is not unusual for the martyrs depicted to appear transfigured into Hindu gods. It is therefore not outlandish to suggest that Gupta's blood portraiture, as offering, connotes a form of communion analogous with that of *puja* and its transfer of substances. Like the idols of gods discussed by Gell, the portraits are not only depictions. There is an aniconic element, too, for the portraits index, quite literally, the artist's spatio-temporal presence as substantive offerings to the icons they comprise. The painting itself is transactional in this sense; it enframes *puja*. Recall also Gupta's comparison, referred to above, between exhibition hall and temple space, with the music of *desh-bhakti* (patriotism) considered to be analogous to the way incense helps create a mood of devotional communion.

What is more, Guha (2007) has suggested that Bose's exhortation – specifically its call for blood sacrifice – derived from the traditions of bloodthirsty Kali worship so popular in Bose's native province of Bengal. If this is correct, then the refrain to which the *samiti* responds had its origins in a similar set of sacrificial logics to those that the paintings now enframe. And of course, it is no longer only the artist's blood that communes with the images it is used to depict. The need for re-touching resulted in collection of blood from several hundred others. That there are multiple bloods mixed into the image collectivizes the *puja* that is enframed in the space of the portrait.

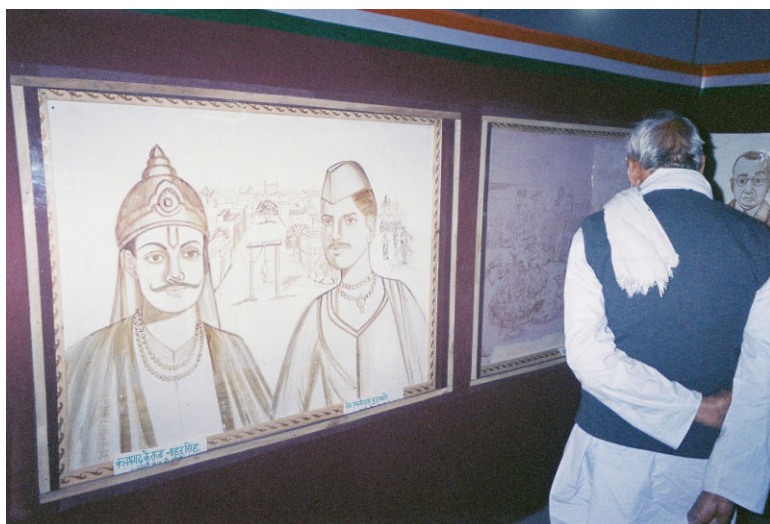
But this is not all that the 'literalism' of the artist's presence achieves. I turn now to the affective dimension of the portraits, focusing on visitor responses to them. Are the portraits efficacious in the manner intended by Gupta and his *samiti*?

### Affective literalism

The responses I obtained at the exhibition at the Red Fort do not provide a clear-cut answer to the above question. A good portion of the visitors I spoke with were not aware, despite the information displayed, that human blood had been used for the portraits. However, to some degree the exhibition I attended was not typical of the other occasions in which the paintings have been displayed (school classrooms, stand-alone exhibitions, etc.). Attendance, this time round, tended to be an epiphenomenon of the primary purpose of the tourist's visit (i.e. to see the main Red Fort buildings). Many attendees, then, could hardly be said to have been stimulated to attend by the novel prospect of a sanguinary mode of portraiture, though that is not to say that others have not been so at other perhaps less atypical display venues (Fig. 4).

Responses gained from discussion but also in (mainly Hindi) written form in the visitors' book, though diverging little from what is a quite familiar nationalist 'script' that emphasizes the requirement to honour and remember the country's fallen heroes, were mainly of a manner that Gupta would find gratifying: that is, they offered evidence that the 'correct' nationalist interpretations and sentiments had duly been stimulated by the works on display. One visitor, Brijmohan Prasad from Punjab, stated: 'Old memories are being refreshed'. Meghnaath Rai from Bihar stated similarly: 'These people gave their lives to liberate the country – we should take inspiration (*prerna*)'. Even more pleasing for Gupta: 'I wish that my name was also included among these *shahids*, then I could have called myself a true child of Mother India'. Another comment, this time in English: 'I am proud to be an Indian and also proud of those persons who forgot about themselves and gave their whole blood for our motherland. *Jai Hind* (Hail India)'. A





**Figure 4.** A visitor at the exhibition before a portrait depicting Raja Nahar Singh of Ballabhgargh and Seth Ramji Das Gur Wale, both of whom were involved in the Indian Uprising of 1857.

further observation, from Manoj Mishra of Faizabad, reflected similar sentiments to those of Gupta concerning memory and willingness to sacrifice: 'This exhibition is in the blood of the artist! It is inspiring for the new generations. If any other country raises its evil eye (*buri nazar*) towards India the entire young generation will be prepared to hang'. Other visitors made similar comments concerning a present situation characterized by forgetfulness and consequent lessening of willingness to sacrifice: 'These portraits in blood are inspiring. It is important that these ideas reach the new generation as it is straying (*binak*) from its path'. In respect of the precipitative aim of the exhibition, comments such as 'I want to be like them and give my life for the country' are strongly indicative of the kind of positive response Gupta was looking for.

A noteworthy aspect of the responses offered by those who were explicitly aware that the paintings were composed of blood is their emphasis on sentiment and, in particular, the heart. For instance, one Sajid Ali, who attended the exhibition with his two toddler-age children in order to further their knowledge of the freedom struggle, stated: 'This exhibition makes one feel proud to be Indian. Being in blood, the sentiments come straight from the heart (*jazbaat dil se nikle hain*)'. A Mr Rampal, from Uttar Pradesh, told me: 'I have a high respect for the persons who gave blood for these paintings. It touches my heart'. Rabiya Muhammed from Orissa noted in the visitors' book: 'The paintings are from the heart and now patriotic feeling (*desh ke prati prem*) is increased in my heart also'. Many more such examples could be given. And as Gupta himself told me: 'Some say that blood should not be used for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> But I say, it is the most special substance for [the promotion of] national sentiments because it comes literally from the heart (*sidha dil se*)'.

In Western contexts, in order to insist upon the sincerity of a particular feeling, it is a commonplace to assert that such a sentiment 'comes from the heart'. Though many non-South Asians would surely maintain that the heart is the seat of the emotions, such understandings are nevertheless premised more on metaphorical than on physiological

ideas about the provenance of 'sentiments' (see Bildhauer [this volume] on the association of blood with emotions in medieval Europe, and Alberti [2010] on connections between the heart and affective states). In Schneider's (1980) famous analysis, Americans view love as consequent on blood ties, without these things necessarily being identical to one another. What is interesting about the visitor responses recorded above is the sense that, because the medium of the portraits has literally passed through the human hearts of those from whom it has been extracted, the sentiments of the works are more forcefully conveyed and authentic. Indeed, there is the suggestion that the blood medium does not merely connote the nationalist sentiment that incited its extraction but that it *is*, quite literally, that sentiment as unmediated affect. Sentiment thus appears as a kind of material.

If, following Mazzarella, 'any social project that is not imposed by force alone must be affective in order to be effective' (2009: 299), then strikingly visible blood-as-affect appears to be a key source of the required affective efficacy in the case of Gupta's project. None of this will be particularly surprising for South Asianist scholars familiar with the potential for the particulate transmissibility of personhood in the region, and indeed I have shown elsewhere how certain categories of blood donor in the subcontinent see their blood as being made up largely of spirit, love, knowledge, and intentions (Copeman 2009a: 91). What is, however, worthy of consideration is that the understanding here of sentiment as a kind of material appears consequent on the role of the heart as source of that material.

The presupposition that the heart is the seat of genuine feeling seemingly causes the blood that has flowed from it literally to embody the sentiments that gave rise to its extraction. The comments above appear to indicate that it is this derivation of the medium that makes the portraits largely 'effective' in the manner desired by Gupta insofar as congruent sentiments are in turn produced in their viewers.

In a study of 'sinking heart' syndrome among Punjabi people living in England, Krause (1989) notes the literal nature of understandings of the condition, referring to Ayurvedic conceptions of the heart as a reservoir for emotional processes (1989: 568). From love and pride to shame and fear, feelings 'belong to the body and they flow [literally] from the heart'. As Krause also notes, the word for heart, *dil*, is frequently used for 'I' in Punjabi. For the village Muslims in Chitral, Pakistan, studied by Marsden, 'the most important source of a person's genuine thought is the heart (*hardi*)' (2005: 88), while for Mauritian Muslims of Indian origin, the ability to listen in a sensitive way to devotional poetry in honour of the Prophet Muhammad is described as 'hearing with the heart' (*dil se*) (Eisenlohr 2010: 320). In the *Upanishads*, the heart is the central spiritual power in the body; moreover, 'Supreme heaven shines in the lotus of the heart'. It is reported that 'the literality of this image caused beautiful, poetic confusions in anatomical beliefs' (Young 2007: 16). Finally, the example *par excellence* of the heart as the literal repository of genuine feeling: the story of Hanuman, the Hindu monkey deity and ardent devotee of the gods Ram and Sita, who, when his devotion is mocked, rips open his chest to reveal Ram and Sita literally ensconced in his heart (see Gell 1998: 143; Young 2007: 16).

It is clearly beyond the scope of this essay to provide a comprehensive cultural history of the heart in South Asia, suffice it to say that in the cases under consideration the portraits' material composition from a substance delivered, literally, from the heart, and partaking of the sentiment it embodies and produces, appears to lend force to their affective efficacy. Such a finding is congruent with understandings elsewhere in South Asia that see the heart as the literal repository of genuine sentiment. Blood-as-affect

thus possesses both an indicative function (in regard to the sentiment of the artist/blood-giver) and a precipitative function (in regard to congruent sentiments provoked in the viewer), as is indicated by the aforementioned reflection that, since ‘the paintings are from the heart ... patriotic feeling is increased in my heart also’.

### Sanguinary politics

So where does such portraiture fit into the larger sanguinary politics referred to at the beginning of this essay?

Blood extraction in political contexts (principally for purposes of medical donation, petitions, or paintings) may be considered, following Bairy (2009), a key present-day form of political enunciation, for such extractions – speaking as and on behalf of a subject position (Bairy 2009: 112) – are intensely communicative. Somewhat akin to the transformative fasts undertaken by Gandhi, they seek to persuade from the moral high ground of political asceticism. They are a means of presentation and public positioning of self and cause. Such an observation does not, however, explain how or why these extractions have become such a means. I return to these points in a moment after providing a sense of the wider sanguinary milieu.

Gupta’s *samiti* is joined in particular by Hindu nationalist organizations in its proclivity for portraits in blood. In each case blood extraction seems to communicate metonymic intentions, by which I mean that the portion extracted is an indication of the whole the agent is willing to give if called upon. It is a demonstration of intent. Consider here a newspaper article from 2007 headlined ‘Hindu activists paint Lord Rama with blood to protest against Sethu Samundram project’ (*Hindustan Times* 2007). What the headline refers to is a chain of limestone shoals which featured prominently in the famous Hindu mythological text the *Ramayana* and are thought to be threatened by a government project to dredge a channel between India and Sri Lanka in order to cut costs for freight shipping. I quote from the report: ‘The painting using blood as a medium is intended to show the anguish of the Hindu community. “We have expressed the pain we have felt regarding Ram Sethu. If one can give blood (for the cause) he can shed it as well”’. In addition to being an ascetic demonstration of bodily commitment, there is also a threat of further bloodshed.

‘This is a message to those who are opposed to [the Hindu god and king] Ram and the ones concerned with the project that they should relinquish the idea of destructing the bridge or they will have to face the consequences,’ said a leader of [Hindu right formation] the Bajrang Dal.

The blood portrait was thus a kind of premonitory bloodshed, a sanguinary forewarning. Also of interest is that the god Rama formed the subject of the painting, suggesting a further point of connection with the *samiti*’s portraits: that is, the painting becomes the site of an offering of substance according to a logic of enframed *puja* in which devotees ‘mix into’ the deity. Further examples of Hindu nationalist blood portraiture could be readily provided.

That activists of the Hindu right employ blood in such a way is not particularly surprising. Whilst it is important not to impute internal consistency to a highly differentiated set of groups and pragmatic alliances, Hindu nationalist activists have, broadly speaking, been at the forefront of developing a political aesthetics of blood ‘speech’. A protest rally against Islamic terrorism organized by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 2001 featured the

collecting [of] signatures in blood on huge banners proclaiming the 'death of terrorism'. ... A three-wheeler equipped with loudspeaker and manned by a BJP worker did the rounds of colonies around [politician] Khurana's constituency, inviting people to sign their names in blood. "Campaigners first allowed blood to be drawn, saw it being put in a test tube and then dipped cotton padded needles to sign on the banner. And as they did so they were drowned in a chorus of nationalistic slogans", while the wasted blood was poured down the drain... Even school children were included in the "sacrifice" of blood – and all this in a city where the government has been repeatedly announcing a shortage of blood for accident victims (Taneja 2001).<sup>10</sup>

During political demonstrations in 1992 that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, the Hindu nationalist youth group the Bajrang Dal, referred to above, welcomed BJP party leader L.K. Advani to the city by applying a ritual mark (*tilak*) of blood on his forehead (Fuller 2004: 272).<sup>11</sup> On other occasions they have offered him cups of blood. Many activists of the Hindu right, then, see themselves as 'people of blood' (Heuze 1992: 2261), and employ human blood for a wide variety of enunciative purposes. What I am simply seeking to show here is that the *samiti*'s use of blood has its place in a network of political extractions: the transactional enframing of the blood painting, and its metonymic 'threat', are both also features of the wider Indian sanguinary politics and can be used in order to articulate far narrower political visions than that of the *samiti*'s broadly inclusive and 'secular' nationalism.

Yet perhaps such shared features should cause us to reconsider whether the *samiti* is in fact as broadly inclusive as has been suggested. Gupta informed me that he has recently received the promise of a permanent home for his portraits in Vrindavan at the ashram of female Hindu ascetic Sadhvi Rithambara. Not only would the location she has offered place the portraits firmly under a Hindu sign, Sadhvi Rithambara is a Vishwa Hindu Parishad activist of particular notoriety – noted for her anti-Muslim rhetoric and widely regarded to have been instrumental in fuelling the tensions that resulted in the aforementioned destruction of the Babri Masjid. For Gupta, who intends to take the *sadhvi* up on her offer, this is a welcome solution to a practical problem:

Very few people come forward with money. I have to spend Rs 400 a day [roughly £6]. We found it very difficult to get land for [a dedicated] museum in Delhi. But we will go to Vrindavan ... Sadhvi Rithambara, who has an ashram there, has spent 30 lakhs [£40,000] [on housing the portraits and contributing to their upkeep]. She is protecting this heritage for the coming generations.

To quote Sadhvi Rithambara herself upon inaugurating an earlier exhibition of the paintings in Vrindavan: 'It is a rare work. The atrocities of past rulers have been exposed through portraits prepared in blood and it is praiseworthy. It is a symbol of committed patriotism'.<sup>12</sup>

The symmetry with the case of Bose is remarkable. Having earlier been President of the Indian National Congress and a colleague of Gandhi, Bose later formed alliances with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in order to fight against the British. Although Bose was a 'stoutly secular' figure (Guha 2007), Hindu right formations such as the BJP nevertheless seek on occasion to claim Bose as their own. Now the *samiti*'s nationalism is not reducible to that of the Hindu right (just as Bose's is not, despite the BJP's claim), even if in some ways it allies with it in order to perpetuate Gupta's larger vision (as, arguably, did Bose in respect of European fascism). It is, in any case, rarely the case that a neatly demarcated Nehruvian or Gandhian nationalism stands diametrically opposed to a neatly demarcated nationalism of the Hindu right (or any other variety of Indian nationalism). Rather, all sorts of dialectical combinations of nationalist sensibility can

and do arise (Cohen 2008). What the *samiti* and the Hindu right do share, of course, is a commitment to the principle of bloodshed (of one's own and of others) as a prerequisite for national integrity. In other words, in each case the brand of nationalism espoused is resolutely non-Gandhian. If the *samiti* is broadly inclusivist and the Hindu right broadly exclusivist, the third feature of their common non-Gandhianism (or propensity towards the sanguinary) seems to be the enabling factor in respect of the alliance formed by Gupta and Sadhvi Rithambara.

Quite apart from proponents of non-Gandhianism, blood extractions (particularly medical donations) have been held up across the political spectrum as a medium of promise for purposes of political expression. There is even a sense in which blood donation has promised a purification of the political. Bildhauer (this volume) notes that in late medieval Germany blood was considered 'something that gives immediate access to the truth, that cannot be faked, and that, as pure matter, is beyond discourse and symbolism' (p. S61). Blood can therefore produce 'authenticity effects' (see also Carsten, this volume). The affective literalism suggested by the *samiti*'s use of a medium deriving from the heart might be considered an example of this.

Also noteworthy here is the widespread understanding in the subcontinent that blood loss leads to permanent volumetric deficit and consequent depletion of strength, an understanding that seriously hinders blood donation in the subcontinent (see Copeman 2009a: chap. 1). This is frequently expressed in the formulation: 'If I donate blood, I will need a transfusion, so why should I give?' If someone, in the possession of such an understanding, nevertheless donates his or her blood, then one might be more willing to acknowledge that that person's enunciation is sincere (and less a matter of 'a politics of pure calculative instrumentality' [Spencer 1997: 15]). The newsmagazine *Tehelka* stated of Gupta's Red Fort exhibition: 'His tribute may be sincere, but his manner of expressing it is odd'.<sup>13</sup> What the article doubted was not his sincerity but the artistic value of the portraits (which in any case was to miss the point – it was their efficacy, not their status as fine art, that was at stake for the *samiti*). To adapt Bildhauer's formulation, the donation of blood as enunciative act promised to provide immediate access to the truth of the donor's convictions. Given the widespread fears mentioned above, willingness to shed blood demonstrates commitment 'that cannot be faked'. Amidst the acute awareness that political commitments can be – and are – faked, the shedding of blood promised 'unsymbolization', physical proof of sincerity and commitment. This argument is congruent with van de Port's observation about the critical role of the body in seeming to 'precede' all opinionating and therefore in 'upgrading the reality calibre of social and cultural classificatory systems' (2011: 86). This promise of im-mediated political enunciation hinged on anxieties about depletion. We might put it thus: since enunciative bloodshed transcends my own willingness to do likewise, I am forced to construe it as compelling.<sup>14</sup>

Blood donation at political rallies or on the birthdays of politicians is performed not only as an act of devotion to the leader in question, but also as *the truth* of party members' commitment to the medical well-being of constituents. The 'transparency' of blood donation as a mode of enunciation has also found it used in conjunction with anti-corruption campaigns. A blood donation event I attended in Delhi was advertised thus: 'Let's join together and finish corruption. We will begin a new, fresh India. 9 December is the birthday of Sonia Gandhiji. Let all Congress people come and donate their blood at 10 am, Talkatora Road'. Staged by the Youth Congress on the Congress leader's birthday, blood donors signed anti-corruption pledges as they chanted 'Long live Sonia Gandhi'. The donation of blood added an authenticity effect to the signing of



the pledge (to be truthful, to not be corrupt like other political parties) in addition to its being, undoubtedly, an expression of devotion to Sonia Gandhi. Political blood donation events, to borrow Power's (1997) phrasing, may be thought of as rituals of verification (of commitment, or of the 'truth' of one's enunciation).

One can begin to gain a sense of the way in which blood donation has provided a promise of im-mediated political enunciation. But the 'promise' I have referred to has remained somewhat enigmatic. Indeed, blood donation might be said to have become a technique of political ellipsis (or compromised enunciation) as much as truth-telling that results in paradoxical double-movements of reform and reversion. This is the irony of India's sanguinary politics: it is precisely because it has developed into such a consummate sign of worthy political asceticism and enunciation that blood donation has become ripe for appropriation for purposes of obscurity. For example, in 2002 a controversy arose when Hindi film icon Amitabh Bachhan inaugurated a series of blood donation camps for the Uttar Pradesh-based political outfit the Samajwadi Party (SP). They were staged during a state assembly election campaign, a time when the Election Commission's model code comes into force, which is meant to prohibit 'vote buying' by candidates eager to hand out 'electoral freebies' (frequently saris, cooking vessels, alcohol, and cash [see Roberts 2010]). The SP's rival, the Congress Party, lodged a complaint with the commission, alleging that 'Mr Bachhan and the SP leaders were using the blood donation camps to gain political mileage. "These camps are being synchronized with the election campaign and they amount to an offer of allurements to the voters"'.<sup>15</sup>

The complaint was that blood donation was being deployed in order to legitimate otherwise forbidden political bribes. One implication was that since the event was associated with the SP, the blood collected might be viewed as a 'gift' to the public from whom it seeks votes. Probably more pertinent, however, is the way in which the 'token of regard' which is by law quite acceptable for blood donation event organizers to offer to blood donors on completion of their donation can be used to set up an exchange that otherwise would be obstructed. This is where blood donation as a technique of political ellipsis comes into its own. At a time when gifts to voters are explicitly forbidden, and this indeed being the only time that political functionaries would want to make them, the exchange is performed obliquely in the guise of another exchange (that which legitimately inheres in the set-up of blood donation events). That is, taking the donor-voter's blood allows the party in turn to offer back that which they would not be allowed to give if there wasn't a blood donation event acting as 'exchange cover' whilst also making visible an electorally useful association between the party and social service.

Further, a news article headlined 'After the bloodletting, the blood donation' reports on a blood donation camp organized by the notorious Mumbai 'don of Dagdi Chawl', Arun Gawli. It speculates dryly that his own blood donation may have been an attempt to 'atone for his sins'. In fact, the blood donation camp formed part of a publicity drive for his newly constituted political party, the Akhil Bharatiya Sena, through which Gawli seems to have been trying to demonstrate his 'reformed' character (*Indian Express* 1997). Just as the SP is likely to have convinced few people that it was not engaged in 'vote buying' by other means, the tone of the news article documenting Arun Gawli's blood donation evinces marked scepticism about the party leader's supposed reform. Nevertheless, the very attempt to employ blood donation as a means to attain easy political virtue seem to bring blood donation as a mode of political enunciation into disrepute. It is because blood donation is such a readily available (and deployable) sign of political asceticism and 'truth-telling' that its enactment now gives rise to high levels of distrust and scepticism.



A practice associated with discipline and social improvement, it is also used to 'legitimate' bribes and engage in political and religious spectacles of excess in which political parties and religious movements vie to collect the most blood (see Copeman 2009a: chap. 5) *precisely because* of the aforementioned association. In this sense it enables the fruition of the phenomena to which its sign is opposed – hence my suggestion that public blood donation embodies a double-movement of reform and reversion.

## Conclusion

This essay has offered a consideration of India's sanguinary politics through focusing principally on its artistic aspects. As I have tried to show, the portraits in blood produced by the Shaheed Smriti Chetna Samiti share features with the wider sanguinary politics concerning substantive identification between artist and icon and metonymy. Carsten (2011) has recently called attention to the unbounded properties of blood as a liquid form (both corporeally and conceptually). Employing this suggestive terminology, we might say that these portraits provide 'intimations of unboundedness'. The part given is an indication of the whole that is not given but which one is nevertheless willing to give if called upon.

Far less common than blood donation conducted on mass political occasions, blood portraiture does not partake of the competitive duelling between political parties (and indeed devotional movements) that has come to compromise perceptions of the sincerity of this latter mode of sanguinary political enunciation. For Gupta and his *samiti*, the promise that the names of the martyrs would be written in gold and eternally glorified has gone unfulfilled. The portraits were borne of this painful realization. A means of revivifying faded memories, the portraits, too, began to fade, thus forming a kind of meditation on impermanence; the re-touching of the portraits also a re-touching of memory.

No doubt the use of blood as a medium *was* a tactical means of rousing interest and generating footfall. I have argued, however, that the significance of the medium extends well beyond mere calculative deployment. This is because, in being formed through acts of bleeding, the portraits constitute themselves the emulation they call for, indicating that it is not passive but active memory that the *samiti* hopes the portraits will inspire as both mnemonic devices *and* templates for action. The portraits may be considered a contemporary analogue of the call made by Bose for the citizenry to shed its blood. However, they are more 'representationally complex' than Bose's refrain – for they seek to stimulate willingness to shed one's blood in part through the use of blood to make that exhortation. Such bleeding is thus mimetic in two senses: in imitating the bleeding of one's sacrificial forebears, but also in terms of the willingness to sacrifice one's blood that it is supposed to incite in the viewer.

Moreover, the presence of the blood provider as physical residue within the painted image constitutes that image as enframed communion. The nationalist exchange relation invoked by Bose thereby becomes a form of patriotic *pūja*. The literal nature of the affect the portraits embody – direct and unmediated from the heart, so to speak – lends further force to their function as not only models of but also models for sanguinary commitment. The larger Indian sanguinary politics, dominated by blood donation, seemed at one stage to promise a comparably 'transparent' mode of political enunciation. While it would be too simple to assert that blood donation has been recast as a dissembling political form – its continued enactment in a large variety of mass political and devotional settings suggests it continues to possess communicative efficacy of some

kind – its political career nevertheless seems to exemplify ‘the paradoxical tendency of transparency measures to yield, in practice, new opacities’ (Mazzarella 2006: 476).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Revered in West Bengal and elsewhere in India, Subhas Chandra Bose is nevertheless a controversial figure as a result of opposing Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent method of overcoming colonial rule. This led Bose, during the Second World War, to ally with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Though, as we shall see below, Bose was ‘stoutly secular’ (Guha 2007), this has not stopped the Hindu right (as well as the Communist Party) seeking to appropriate his legacy at various times.

<sup>2</sup> This is frequently in order to maintain caste distinctions based upon relative purity.

<sup>3</sup> Famously, Marc Quinn’s *Self*, a frozen sculpture of the artist’s head made from his own blood.

<sup>4</sup> *Mid-Day*, 25 January 2008.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/jan/03martyrs.htm> (accessed 21 January 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Bose himself is reported to have declared to his fellow revolutionaries: ‘Our names will be written in gold letters in the history of free India; every martyr in this holy war will have a monument there’.

<sup>7</sup> Simpson and Corbridge have made a similar observation: ‘Visitors to [India’s] capital city, New Delhi, might be surprised to find so few memorials to Gandhi, Nehru, and other heroes of the Freedom Movement, although they will find faded photographs of the two men ... in the Block and District offices of the Indian state’ (2006: 570).

<sup>8</sup> However, see Rampley (1993: 275) who notes that much Western art has also frequently been valued for its efficacy (ability to produce particular effects).

<sup>9</sup> See Copeman (2009b: 19–20) and Hugh-Jones (2011) on the common criticism that the use of excorporated human blood for purposes of political expressionism or art, if not ultimately donated for medical purposes, is wasteful of a potentially valuable resource.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from *Indian Express*, 3 October 2001.

<sup>11</sup> ‘A mosque built in Ayodhya by the Muslim Emperor Babar in the sixteenth century is believed by militant Hindus to have displaced a temple to Lord Rama, the God-king hero of the Ramayana, at the very site of his birth. In December 1992 [Hindu supremacist activists] demolished the mosque over the course of two days. Hindu-Muslim rioting then broke out in towns across north India’ (Simpson & Corbridge 2006: 570).

<sup>12</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>13</sup> *Tehelka*, 9 October 2009.

<sup>14</sup> See Gell (1999), on whose formulation I draw on here (which in turn draws on Simmel’s theory of value).

<sup>15</sup> *The Hindu*, 2 February 2002.

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## L'art de saigner : mémoire, martyr et portraits de sang

### Résumé

Le présent essai est consacré à la peinture au sang indienne, un genre utilisant le sang humain comme moyen de représentation, et plus particulièrement aux fonctions politiques et mémorielles de cette forme d'expression. Les œuvres, souvent réalisées avec le sang de l'artiste lui-même, représentent fréquemment des « combattants pour la liberté » (*shahid*) tombés pendant la lutte pour l'indépendance de l'Inde. Elles ont pour but d'éveiller chez le public le souvenir des martyrs oubliés, suscitant ainsi un commentaire moral sur une nation qui oublie trop facilement, dans sa course vers le futur, les sacrifices qui lui ont donné naissance. Les fonctions politiques et mémorielles de ces portraits sont recadrées dans le contexte national plus large de la politique du sang, ce dernier étant à la fois un sujet et un moyen de contestation.

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